Coming Up Short

WORKING-CLASS ADULTHOOD IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY

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To my grandmothers, Jean and Mary, for teaching me to draw
wisdom, laughter, and strength from our family past.
To my parents, Michael and Paula, and my brother, Mikey,
for believing in and nurturing me in the present.
And to Ahrum, for our future.

PREFACE

My desire to document the lives of working-class young adults is animated both by personal history and intellectual curiosity. My paternal grandparents were born in Lowell, Massachusetts, one of my two research sites. My grandfather Joe started work in a textile mill on Market Street at age nine, where he ran the empty spools of thread upstairs to be re-spun with cotton. One of eight children, his wife, Mary, was born in 1929, just a few months after the stock market crash and the start of the Great Depression. She still fondly recalls her bustling Irish Catholic family home on Orleans Street. Eighty years later, I often drove by it on my way to an interview. After they married in their early twenties, they moved to the suburb of West Concord, Massachusetts, where my grandfather worked as a state prison guard. The six children they raised were part of the postwar generation who realized the American Dream of upward mobility through hard work and stable, unionized jobs. Joe and Mary hoped that their grandchildren would achieve even more; my parents promised each other on the day I was born that I would be the first in my family to graduate from college.

But my generation is slowly losing the stability hard-won by their grandparents and parents. Over the years I have watched my cousins and my brother face many of the same obstacles as my informants—joining the military because they couldn't find a job; moving back in with their parents; or struggling to get through college, pay back their loans, and make their monthly car payments. Two years ago, my younger brother moved back to Lowell and is currently waiting to be placed on the civil service hiring list. Once a thriving industrial site, the street where he works is now lined by billboards promising "Car Loans! Bad Credit OK! We approve everyone!" This

book tells the story of a family and a country that has run full circle, from my grandparents' birth at the start of the Great Depression, to middle-class suburban dreams, and back to economic insecurity, riskiness, and recession. It is a story of institutions—not individuals or their families—coming up short.

From college to graduate school to postdoctoral studies, I have been extraordinarily blessed to have been surrounded by people and organizations that have nurtured and inspired me, both professionally and personally. First and foremost, I am deeply indebted to the young men and women who graciously welcomed me into their lives, shared their personal experiences, kept in touch with me over Facebook, and believed from the beginning in my work. The desire to be true to their stories motivated me to keep coming back to this book until I got it right.

I completed this manuscript as a National Science Foundation (NSF) and American Sociological Association (ASA) Postdoctoral Fellow at Harvard University. The financial and intellectual support of the NSF and the ASA allowed me to focus on writing while embedded in a first-rate community of scholars. James Cook took an immediate interest in the project, generously providing detailed and incisive feedback and guiding me through the revision process with assurance. The final manuscript reflects his encouragement, attention to detail, and tireless commitment. I am also grateful for the dedicated mentoring I received from Bruce Western and Michèle Lamont, who willingly read drafts, provided perceptive comments, and offered encouragement and helpful career guidance. While at Harvard, I was fortunate to meet Robert Putnam and join his talented and lively research team. The Saguaro Seminar's focus on social connectedness and inequality inspired me to look closely at narratives of trust and betrayal among my informants.

From my first week at Harvard, Nicole Deterding pulled me into department life, read my work more closely than I could have asked for, forced me to go to the gym when I needed a break, and generously and thoughtfully grappled with ideas with me on Thirsty Thursdays. The members of the Harvard Culture and Social Analysis Workshop helped me to sharpen my focus and clarify my ideas over two fruitful years. My fellow NSF-ASA postdoc Jeremy Schulz was always willing to brainstorm ideas, offer insightful feedback, and exchange career advice. Finally, my students in my Coming of Age in the 21st Century junior tutorial reinvigorated my interest in coming of age and reminded me weekly of the real-world importance of studying the transition to adulthood.

At the University of Virginia, my dissertation committee—Sarah Corse, Allison Pugh, Milton Vickerman, and Paul Freedman—provided

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WHEN I ASKED BRANDON,[1] A thirty-four-year-old black man, to share his coming of age story, he promptly labeled himself "a cautionary tale." Growing up in the shadow of a small southern college where both his parents worked in maintenance, he was told from an early age that education was the path to "the land of milk and honey." An eager and hard-working student, Brandon tested into the college preparatory track at his high school and graduated in the top 9 percent of his class. He was elated when he earned a spot at a private university in the Southeast: finally, his childhood dream of building spaceships was coming true. He was even unconcerned about the $80,000 in loans he accrued, joking, "Hey, if I owe you $5, that's *my* problem, but if I owe you $50,000, that's *your* problem!"

Yet, as Brandon explained with a mixture of bitterness and regret, college proved to be the start of a long series of disappointments. Unable to pass calculus or physics, he switched his major from engineering to criminal justice. Still optimistic, he applied to several police departments upon graduation, excited about a future of "catching crooks." The first department used a bewildering lottery system for hiring, and he didn't make the cut. The second informed him that he had failed a mandatory spelling test (*"I had a degree!"*) and refused to consider his application. Finally, he became "completely turned off to this idea" when the third department disqualified him because of a minor incident in college in which he and his roommate "borrowed" a school-owned buffing machine as a harmless prank. Because he "could have been charged with a felony," the department informed him, he was ineligible for police duty. Regrettably, his college had no record of the incident. Brandon had volunteered the information out of a desire to illustrate his honest and upstanding character and improve his odds of getting the job.

With "two dreams deferred,"[2] Brandon took a job as the nightshift manager of a clothing chain, hoping it would be temporary. Eleven years later, he describes his typical day, which consists of unloading shipments, steaming and pricing garments, and restocking the floor, as "not challenging at all. I don't get to solve problems or be creative. I don't get to work with numbers, and I am a numbers guy. I basically babysit a team and deal with personnel." When his loans came out of deferment, he couldn't afford the monthly payments and decided to get a master's degree—partly to increase his earning potential and partly to put his loans back into deferment. After all, it had been "hammered into his head" that higher education was the key to success. He put on twenty-five pounds while working and going to school full-time for three years. He finally earned a master's degree in government, paid for with more loans from "that mean lady Sallie Mae."[3] So far, Brandon has still not found a job that will pay him enough to cover his monthly loan and living expenses. He has managed to keep the loans in deferment by continually consolidating—a strategy that costs him $5,000 a year in interest.

Taking stock of his life, Brandon is torn between feelings of betrayal and hope. On the one hand, he sees himself as a "rare and unique commodity— a black man with a college degree and no prison record."[4] Yet despite these accomplishments, he has achieved less than his own parents, who were married with children and owned a home by his age. He pondered:

> I feel like I was sold fake goods. I did everything I was told to do and I stayed out of trouble and went to college. Where is the land of milk and honey? I feel like they lied. I thought I would have choices. That sheet of paper [his degree] cost so much and does me *no good*. Sure, schools can't guarantee success, but come on; they could do better to help kids out. You have to give Uncle Sam your first born to get a degree and it doesn't pan out!

Barely able to support himself, he has avoided committed relationships, resigned to the fact that "no woman wants to sit on the couch all the time and watch TV and eat at Burger King." He reflected, "I can only take care of myself now. Money isn't love, but you need to be stable to be in a relationship. And once you start with kids you can't go back. I am missing out on life but making do with what I have." But on the other hand, he still holds tight to the American Dream of buying his "own piece of land" and landing "a nine-to-five with a salary," insisting that opportunities do exist for the taking. He ruefully explained, "My biggest risk is myself. I don't

want to leave or just take another job even though I could. I limit my opportunities too much. I hold on too much to what I have. I don't want to uproot my life for a job because pulling up the stakes is too much to handle." In the end, he sees *himself*—his unwillingness to uproot everything he has to get ahead—as his greatest barrier to success.

Six hundred miles away, in a working-class neighborhood in Lowell, Massachusetts, I sit across the kitchen table from a twenty-four-year-old white woman named Diana. Dressed in a neon pink tank top that shows off just a hint of the shamrock tattoo on her lower back, Diana lends a brightness to the peeling white paint and murky linoleum floors of the duplex she lives in with her mother and two brothers. The daughter of a dry-cleaner and a cashier, Diana graduated from high school with a partial scholarship to a private university in Boston. She embarked on a criminal justice degree while working part-time at a local Dunkin' Donuts. While she enjoyed learning about the criminal justice system—her eyes lit up as she explained the nuances of due process to me—Diana began to doubt whether the benefits of college would ever outweigh the costs; after two years of wavering back and forth, she dropped out of school to be a full-time cashier. She explained, "When I work, I get paid at the end of the week. But college, I would have had to wait five years to get a degree, and once I got that, who knows if I would be working or find something I wanted to be." Now, close to $100,000 in debt, Diana has forged new dreams of getting married, buying a home with a pool in a wealthy suburb of Boston, and having five children, a cat, and a dog by the time she is thirty: "That is all I can think about. I am old-fashioned like that."

Just a few minutes later, however, Diana frankly admitted that she would never find a man with a stable, well-paying job to marry and that she would regret her decision to leave school: "Everyone says you can't really go anywhere unless you have a degree. I don't think I am going to make it anywhere past Dunkin' when I am older and that scares me to say. Like it's not enough to support me now." Living at home and bringing home under $275 a week, Diana feels stuck in an extended adolescence with no end in sight. Her yardsticks for adulthood—owning her own home, getting married, having children, and finding a job that pays her bills—remain spectacularly out of reach. She reflected: "Like your grandparents would get married out of high school, first go steady, then get married, like, they had a house . . . since I was sixteen I have asked my mother when I would be an adult, and she recently started saying I'm an adult now that I'm working and paying rent, but I don't *feel* any different." Mainly, she feels stuck, unable to figure out how to change the direction that her life

has taken: "I just wish someone like a fifty-year-old would tell me what to do, and make it easier, because I can't make up my mind!"[5]

How would you tell your coming of age story without the milestones—graduations, weddings, promotions, births—that propel it forward? How might you make sense of the broken promises—unused degrees, unexpected layoffs, or failed relationships—that disconnect the pieces of yourself that you spent a lifetime carefully assembling? This is a book about what happens when taken-for-granted models for organizing one's life—whether in terms of relationships, work, time, or commitment—become obsolete, unattainable, or undesirable. Both Brandon and Diana, like many working-class young adults, are growing up in a world where taken-for-granted pathways to adulthood are quickly disappearing; they do not feel "grown up."

What, then, does it mean to "grow up" today? Even just a few decades ago, the transition to adulthood would not have been experienced as a time of confusion, anxiety, or uncertainty.[6] In 1960, the vast majority of women married before they turned twenty-one and had their first child before twenty-three. By thirty, most men and women had moved out of their parents' homes, completed school, gotten married, and begun having children. Completing these steps was understood as normal and natural, the only path to a complete and respectable adult life: indeed, half of American women at this time believed that people who did not get married were "selfish and peculiar," and a full 85 percent agreed that women and men *should* get married and have children (Furstenberg et al. 2004).

But amid the economic and social turmoil of the 1960s and 70s, the triumph of global capitalism in the 80s, the technology boom of the 90s, and the grinding recession of the 2000s, something strange happened: American youth stopped "growing up." As over a decade of scholarship has revealed, traditional markers of adulthood—leaving home, completing school, establishing financial independence, marrying, and having children—have become increasingly delayed, disorderly, reversible, or even forgone in the latter half of the twentieth century.[7] By 2009, almost 50 percent of people ages eighteen to twenty-four and 10 percent of those twenty-five to thirty-four were living with their parents, compared to 35 percent and 7 percent, respectively, in 1960.[8] While the median age at first marriage remained at twenty years old for women and twenty-two for men from 1890 to the early 1960s, it had soared to almost twenty-six for women and twenty-eight for men by 2010.[9] In 2008, a greater percentage of births were to women ages thirty-five and older than to teenagers (Livingston and Cohn 2010). And in 2007, nearly 40 percent of births were to unmarried

mothers, up from less than 5 percent in 1960 (Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends 2010). Unlike their 1950s counterparts who followed a well-worn path from courtship to marriage to childbearing, men and women today are more likely to remain unmarried; to live at home and stay in school for longer periods of time; to have children out of wedlock; to divorce; or not to have children at all (Berlin, Furstenberg, and Waters 2010; Cherlin 2009; Livingston and Cohn 2010).[10]

The growing numbers of men and women in their twenties and even thirties who are living (or moving back in) with their parents, jumping from job to job, and postponing marriage and child rearing have been met with disdain and mockery from the popular media, where articles proclaiming "Here Come the Millenials!," "20-Somethings: No, I Won't Grow Up," "The Peter Pan Generation," and "College Grads, 30 Isn't the New 20" depict a youth culture that shuns conformity, structure, and responsibility, frolicking away the decade or so after high school before settling down to responsible adult life. Perhaps most tellingly, a 2007 *60 Minutes* episode warning "The Millenials Are Coming!" summed up popular attitudes toward this generation with the following snide dismissal: "They're living and breathing themselves and that keeps them very busy."

As these examples suggest, both popular and scholarly depictions of the Millenials often portray the transition to adulthood as a process of self-exploration in which young people try out different identities and lifestyles—perhaps backpacking through Southeast Asia, adopting a skinny-jeaned hipster existence in Brooklyn, or taking an unpaid internship with a congressman in Washington, DC—between graduating from college and choosing a future career path. In this vein, the prominent psychologist Jeffrey Arnett labels the years between adolescence and adulthood the "self-focused age" (2004: 12) equating twenty-first-century adulthood with learning to "stand alone" and make choices and decisions independently from among a wide range of options (1998). An emerging genre of self-help literature on the "quarter-life crisis" reinforces this conception of adulthood as an exploration-filled adventure. In *Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties*, for instance, Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner (2001: 3) presume a wide range of choices and possibilities for today's youth: "The sheer number of possibilities can certainly inspire hope—that is why people say that twenty-somethings have their whole lives ahead of them. But the endless array of decisions can also make a recent graduate feel utterly lost." Implicit in these characterizations of young adulthood are the resources and privileges of the middle and upper class—a college education, a secure foothold in the labor market, a